Chapter Nine

The ‘New Left’

The most important fact about the New Left is that it exists. When Cliff Slaughter opened up discussion on “The ‘New Left’ and the Working Class” he made important criticisms of the theories about our society which some writers in the *New Reasoner* and *Universities and Left Review* have advanced. But while I agree with almost everything that he wrote, I feel that he chose the wrong starting-point for discussion. For a Marxist, the question must be: what does the existence of this grouping point to in the changing character of our political life? Slaughter too easily talks of ‘the petty-bourgeois intellectual’ and by so doing slides the New Left into a category which gives us no illumination as to the specific characteristics of this movement. And when one begins to look at the New Left carefully it is clear that the views with which Slaughter disagrees have also been challenged from within the New Left. John Saville has disagreed with Dorothy Thompson, and both Ralph Samuel and Edward Thompson have criticised Stuart Hall fairly trenchantly. What characterises the New Left is not the holding of an agreed set of doctrines, but

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2 Slaughter 1959.
something more difficult to characterise, a frame of mind. Indeed it has more than once been argued on the New Left that it is among its merits that it is so open a movement, that it is not endangering itself by becoming constricted within some new orthodoxy. What it has created are two journals, both with far larger circulations than would have been thought possible a few years ago. *Universities and Left Review* for example has a circulation of between six and seven thousand. It has brought hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of young people into contact with socialist discussion. And it has provided, as Slaughter does not fail to recognise, important contributions to those discussions. How has all this been achieved? The answer comes, I think, from the meeting of two different groups. There are on the one hand the ex-Communists of 1956 and some like-minded people who abandoned Stalinism and have tried to rethink their socialism from the ground up. When they rebelled against the bureaucracy of the Stalinist party machines and the mechanical determinism of Stalinist ideology they did so in the name of a conception of human nature which was authentically Marxist. And the tone of voice in which they spoke caught the ears of a whole generation of young people who had not as yet been caught and moulded into political shape by the orthodoxies of our own society. The New Left finds its audience in the generation that marched to and from Aldermaston. What it has done is to provide leadership for and articulate expression of the feelings of an age-group that no one else has succeeded in influencing so strongly.

Who are these young people and what is their mood? Certainly most of them are middle-class, students and ex-students, teachers, office-workers, journalists and so on. But they are people who could make an impressive contribution to the fight for socialism. And they are in many ways the group who are most nakedly exposed to the pressures of conformism in our society. They do not normally meet working-class people very often. They are fed from all sides with the reports of what is happening to the workers brought back by the middle-class sociological explorers from the proletarian jungle. What they do respond to sharply are the threats which meet them in their own experience: the impact of the mass media, the debasement of values under capitalism, the appalling official cynicism in face of the H-bomb. Their vitality is a sign of the inability of the official set-up to impose its orthodoxies, of the continual revolt of people against the patterns that the bureaucrats try to impose upon them.